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ABSTRACT

During the past 30 years, there has been a global surge of democracy. For most people of the world today, democracy is the prevailing source of political legitimacy. In 2002, 121 of the world's 192 sovereign states could be recognized as democracies in terms of the minimal global standard for an electoral democracy. This digest discusses: (1) the status of democracy in the world; (2) a globally applicable conception of democracy; (3) components of education for democracy; and (4) recommendations on how to teach democracy. (Contains 13 references and 3 Internet addresses). (BT)

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Teaching Democracy

By John J. Patrick

During the past 30 years, there has been a global surge of democracy. For most people of the world today democracy is the prevailing source of political legitimacy. This Digest discusses (1) the status of democracy in the world, (2) a globally applicable conception of democracy, (3) components of education for democracy, and (4) recommendations on how to teach democracy.

The Global Status of Democracy. There is a broad international agreement today on a minimal or threshold standard by which to judge whether or not a regime is a democracy. This minimal criterion is the regular occurrence of free, open, fair, and contested elections by which an inclusive citizenry selects its representatives in government. Thus, there is government by consent of the governed in which the people's representatives are accountable to the people (Huntington 1991, 7; Karatnycky 2002, 722).

In 2002, 121 of the world's 192 sovereign states could be recognized as democracies in terms of the minimal global standard for an electoral democracy. The collective populations of these electoral democracies accounted for 64.6% of the world's population (Karatnycky 2002,7). By contrast, in 1900 there was not even one country in the world that met today's minimal global standard for democracy. In 1950, there were only 22 authentic democracies comprising 14.3% of the world's population. By the end of the twentieth century, however, there was a dramatic global trend toward electoral democracy as communist regimes and other types of autocratic or authoritarian systems withered and died (Karatnycky 2002).

A Globally Applicable Conception of Democracy. There is more to the content and process of democracy than is entailed by the minimal electoral standard. An advanced or more fully developed conceptualization of democracy in today's world includes electoral democracy in concert with such core concepts as representational government, constitutionalism, human rights, citizenship, civil society, and market economy (Dahl 1998). The idea of constitutionalism is the key to comprehending an advanced conceptualization of democracy.

Constitutionalism means limited government and the rule of law to prevent the arbitrary use of power, to protect human rights, to regulate democratic procedures in elections and public policymaking, and to achieve a community's shared purposes. Constitutionalism in a democracy, therefore, both limits and empowers the government of, by, and for the people. Through a constitution to which they have consented, the people grant power to the government to act effectively for the common good. The people also set constitutional limits on the power of their democratic government in order to prevent tyranny and to protect their rights. So, in an authentic constitutional democracy, the people's elected representatives in government are limited by the supreme law of the people's constitution for the primary purposes of protecting equally the rights of everyone in the polity and thereby promoting the common good of the community.

A market economy, which promotes the free exchange of goods and services, and civil society, which involves freely-formed civil associations, are distinguishing features of a constitutional democracy. And both the market economy and civil society depend upon constitutionalism to guarantee the freedom conjoined with order that enables them to thrive (Dahl 1998, 166-167).

Components of Education for Democracy. There are four widely recognized components of civic education for democracy: (1) civic knowledge, (2) cognitive civic skills, (3) participatory civic skills, and (4) civic dispositions (Patrick 1999). The four components of education for democracy are congruent with teaching and learning the core concepts by which we define, compare, and evaluate democratic and nondemocratic governments.

Effective education for citizenship in a democracy dynamically connects the four components of civic knowledge, cognitive civic skills, participatory civic skills, and civic dispositions. Effective teaching and learning of civic knowledge, for example, require that it be connected to civic skills and dispositions in various kinds of activities. Elevation of one component over the other—for example, civic knowledge over skills or vice-versa—is a pedagogical flaw that impedes civic learning. Thus, teachers should combine core content and the processes by which student develop skills and dispositions.

Core content is the indispensable foundation of an effective education for democracy (Torney-Purta and Others 2001). Individuals who have a deep and abiding comprehension of the prevailing principles of democracy, the big ideas that define democratic government and citizenship, are more likely than other individuals to exhibit several desirable dispositions of democratic citizenship such as a propensity to vote and otherwise participate in political and civic life, political tolerance, political interest, and concern for the common good (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). Students who comprehend core concepts tend to be more adept in their use of such cognitive skills as organization and interpretation of information, and they are more likely than others to know and retain information about current political institutions, personalities, and events.

Concluding Recommendations. Here are three concluding recommendations for teaching democracy:

1. Teach a global or universal definition of electoral democracy to enable students to compare and evaluate regimes according to a common and minimal world standard. Thus, students will have the capacity to discern what a democracy is and what it is not (Fischer and Shinew 1997).

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2. Teach a set of core concepts by which students can think beyond the minimal global standard for an electoral democracy to compare and evaluate political systems more deeply and complexly. The key to any set of concepts on the meaning of democracy is constitutionalism, which refers to limited government and the rule of law (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996).

3. Teach the relative worth of democracy in comparison with alternative types of government. Thus, students will learn that democracy in practice has been better than other types of governments in protecting human rights, promoting international peace, and fostering economic growth and prosperity (Karatnycky 2002).

Internet Resources. The following World Wide Web sites include resources for researchers and teachers on teaching democracy:

Albert Shanker Institute of the American Federation of Teachers. This Web site offers information about education for democracy: <http://www.ashankerinst.org>.

Center for Civic Education (CCE). The CCE Web site contains papers on theory, research, and practice in teaching democracy. There are also links to other useful sites such as Civnet, which provides information on international civic education projects: <http://www.civiced.org/>.

Freedom House. Through its widely-respected annual global survey, Freedom House tracks the progress of democracy throughout the world. See the Web site of Freedom House to find statistics and commentary about the status of democracy and liberty in the world in different places and periods of world history. This Web site also includes a rating of each century in the world in regard to its status as democratic and free or not democratic and free: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/>.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche, paper, or electronic full text from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; World Wide Web <edrs.com>; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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